

MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE MAGAZINE  
Spring 1983

Forum Sponsors a Look  
At CIA's Policy Role

One of the more informative and provocative events of the winter just past was a three-day series of discussions on the CIA and its role in American foreign policy. During the event, sponsored by the Political Forum, there was agreement that the CIA does indeed play a role, but some disagreement over what that role is, and what it properly should be.

The event, held February 8, 9 and 10, began with an evening talk by U.S. Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, who was introduced by President Olin Robison.

Mr. Leahy prefaced his remarks with an anecdote about his first experience — a very personal one — with the CIA.

"When I first went to Washington, we moved to McLean, Va., where the CIA has its headquarters," Mr. Leahy said. "I told the kids to simply tell people that their father worked for the government, because I didn't want them to get any special treatment because I was a senator.

"In McLean, of course, where half the people on the street work for the CIA, they would say, 'My dad works for the government,' and the people would nudge each other in the ribs and say, 'Uh huh.' So when my license plates arrived, and they said U.S. Senator, with a number 2 on them, the folks said, 'You know that new guy who works for the CIA? You wouldn't believe his cover.'"

Mr. Leahy emphasized the role played by the CIA in "providing the analytical and technological data base for American foreign and national security policies," such as monitoring compliance with arms control agreements. He said that this role, which he considers legitimate and necessary, is often forgotten because of the public concern with covert action, which Mr. Leahy defined as "a bit of Washington jargon for clandestine efforts to influence the actions or policies of foreign governments."

While admitting that covert action should concern people, because of past abuses, Mr. Leahy said that "there is a legitimate, although rigidly controlled and very limited role for covert action as an adjunct to diplomacy in American foreign policy." He noted that the key words were the qualifiers, controlled and limited, saying, "I believe in some important cases this administration is tempted to fall back on covert action as a

substitute for, not an adjunct to, diplomacy. This is where congressional oversight enters the picture."

Mr. Leahy said it was his belief that the oversight process in Congress was working and that the intelligence agencies had responded well to calls for reform. But he also said that the process suffers from some structural flaws, the chief one being the limited amount of time that senators and representatives can devote to their intelligence committee duties.

"Every member of the Senate Intelligence Committee belongs to at least two other major committees (I am a member of three other major committees), all important and all demanding of our time. The plain fact," Mr. Leahy said, "is that no member of the committee can give oversight the sustained attention needed to do the kind of job I think we should. This is true, let me emphasize, in all aspects of intelligence, not merely in the area of covert action. I underline covert action because this is where the most serious abuses have occurred in the past and where the risk of new abuses in the future is greatest."

He suggested that the Senate, and the American people, might be better served "if a certain portion of the committee, maybe a rotating one-third or one-half, could be excused from work on other committees for a set period, maybe a year or two . . . to devote most of their time to intensive oversight."

An alternative, he said, would be a strengthened CIA Liaison Office, which would not simply respond to committee inquiries, but would be responsible for identifying issues and getting committee members involved at an early stage. He said he doubted either of these solutions would come to pass and said, "The most realistic short term answer is for members and staff, however burdened, to press harder for information, to be more inquisitive and, most importantly, to demand better accounting and justification."

In a panel discussion the following afternoon, both congressional oversight and the uses of covert action came in for some criticism. On the panel were Lee Strickland, assistant general counsel to the CIA; Daniel Hoffman, a professor of political science at UVM, and David Rosenberg, professor of political science at Middlebury.

Mr. Strickland maintained that "every country needs an intelligence agency," to gather information from human and technical sources, to write reports and to carry out covert action. (For collectors of government jargon: Mr. Strickland referred to people from foreign countries who supply the CIA with information as "assets.") He emphasized that no covert action takes place without congressional and presidential approval, adding that the high risks associated with such operations make them something the agency obviously doesn't want to get involved in very often.

Mr. Strickland also said that the congressional oversight process was working well: "The agency has no complaints."

Mr. Hoffman, on the other hand, did. "The question," he said, "is how to appropriately authorize and control secret operations. The short answer is, it can't be done."

"Does Congress really know what's going on?" Mr. Hoffman asked. "Congress doesn't know. The best that can be said is that a small group of congressmen may know, but even they can't use the secret information they have to explain their positions."

So, he suggested, it comes down to the president; and as Mr. Strickland had noted, covert action on the part of the CIA and other intelligence agencies can be a "seductive tool" for a chief executive.

"How much does the president know?" Mr. Hoffman asked. "It's unclear." And he suggested that perhaps the more important questions were how much the president wanted to know, and what use he would make of the secret information. "President Reagan, for example, appears to be living in a dream world," Mr. Hoffman said, "certifying that El Salvador has made good progress on the road to human rights. What use secret information is to a person like that, I'll leave it to you to judge."

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